

# The Core as an Education for a Democratic Citizenry

*J. Rufus Fears*

In the *Politics*, Aristotle describes the essential role and quality of education in a free society. For Aristotle, education is the greatest of all means for ensuring constitutional government. There is no profit in even the best of laws or a free constitution if the citizens themselves have not been educated in the spirit of that constitution. Accordingly, Aristotle argues, legislators will make the education of the young their foremost concern, for upon that education the survival of the constitution depends. That education, to continue Aristotle's argument, must be a common experience, for the state itself has one common end. Moreover, because it is of such vital importance to the commonwealth, it will be an education provided for by the public. That education has both a moral and a political purpose. It is to inculcate in the citizens the habits of private and public virtue.

And for these reasons, Aristotle insists, education in a democracy will be unique unto itself. It will differ fundamentally from education suited to a citizen who lives under a nondemocratic regime. Above all, education in a democracy will be an education for freedom. It will, in Aristotle's words, educate the citizen to understand the true nature of political liberty. It will educate the citizen to recognize and reject false and pernicious definitions of liberty, and to understand that true liberty is not license, it is not the freedom to live and do as one likes. True liberty is, instead, freedom to live under the law. And the citizen educated for freedom will understand that to live by the rule of the constitution is not slavery, but rather, salvation. This is a fundamental text in the Western tradition. It defines the ideal of a liberal education as an education suited to a free citizen, and it draws an inextricable nexus between that education and the survival of a constitution based upon liberty under law.

That nexus had already been drawn by the Athenian democracy a century before Aristotle, the first government in history to be based upon the idea of the greatest good for the greatest number. Its political institutions reflected the conviction that every citizen was capable of holding political office, and should be actively involved in every phase of the governmental process. It also understood the need to educate those citizens to civic responsibility through a common forum of political discourse. That forum was the drama—the theatrical plays presented at dramatic festivals held in honor of the god Dionysus. There playwrights like Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides presented to an audience of Athenian citizens dramas like the *Oresteia*, the *Antigone*, *Oedipus the King*, *The Trojan Women*. These dramatic productions were intensely political experi-

---

J. Rufus Fears is professor of classics, chairman of the Department of Classical Studies, and associate dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Boston University, Boston, MA 02215. He is also director of the Boston University Humanities Foundation.

ences, raising the most profound issues of the moral dimension of political actions, and insisting that there can be no separation of politics from morality and religion in the life of a free community. These were plays intended to inform debate in the Athenian assembly. They were profoundly contemporary in their relevance, but they sought to convey an understanding of the timelessness of the issues raised. Set in the distant past, drawing upon a rich mythological tradition, they engaged their audiences as participants in a great dialogue resonating through history.

The Athenian democracy failed. The audience which watched the *Antigone*, the *Oedipus*, and *The Trojan Women* would vote to plunge themselves into a catastrophic war, and continue that war at the cost of national suicide. And indeed, it was from the failures of democracy at Athens that Aristotle drew some of the most somber lessons of his *Politics*. Despite the moral grandeur of the drama, what the Athenian democracy lacked was a systematic program to educate the young in the spirit of a free constitution. Hence, as Aristotle quite explicitly states, it became an aberrant form of government pursuing policies totally opposed to its own self-interest, and destroying itself. We may disagree, but in Aristotle's view, the reason for that aberration was a false conception of liberty, which began with the assumption that justice consists in equality, proceeded to identify equality with the sovereign will of the masses, and ended with a view that equality and liberty consist in doing what one likes.

This image was determinative for the founders of a new republic in a new world. The American founders shared Aristotle's view of the Athenian democracy. For John Adams, the Athenian democracy was a failure, an imperfect polity which burnt itself out amidst never-ending fluctuations in the national councils, continual factions, massacres, proscriptions, banishments, and the deaths of its best citizens.<sup>1</sup> The founders also shared with Aristotle the deeply held conviction that education was fundamental to the survival of a truly liberal constitution marked by liberty under law.

In the eighteenth century, the path to a liberal education led through classical antiquity. For the age that gave birth to the American Revolution, the Greco-Roman world assumed a paradigmatic function. The history of Greece and Rome and the Greek and Latin classics served as an inexhaustible storehouse of moral and political examples of virtues to be emulated and of vices to be avoided.

The generation that founded the American republic engaged in a dialogue with classical antiquity. It was a generation selective in its approach to the classics, a generation that found Tacitus more sympathetic than Plato. It was a generation convinced of the utility of history, believing that similar circumstances will always produce similar events, and it was a generation learned enough in the classics to draw ominous parallels between Caesar Augustus and George III, and bold enough to take political action based upon those parallels. It was a generation that searched the classical past for an answer to the most

pressing concern of the day, the securing and nurturing of political liberty. As John Adams wrote, the history of the Greek and Roman republics was seen as a mirror in which to view and reflect upon those constitutional means which best serve to foster and preserve freedom within the confines of just laws and acceptable traditions.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, classical antiquity provided an essential frame of reference to a uniquely gifted generation of American statesmen who proclaimed their independence from Britain in the name of liberty, defended that liberty in war, and then established a constitution aimed at institutionalizing liberty. Viewed through eighteenth-century spectacles, the classics provided a common currency of intellectual and political exchange, informing the political dialogue and laying the foundations for public consensus by establishing a set of commonly shared political values and definitions.

This dialogue with classical antiquity, so formative for the founders, was possible because of the character of their general education. It was a general education based on the classics, but the classics were not read as repositories of a dead tradition, or viewed as historical documents aimed at illuminating civilizations essentially alien to our own. For the age of the American Revolution the classics were living texts, texts to be studied because they addressed present realities, and addressed them in the most concrete terms, living texts which formed character, inculcated moral truths, and offered concrete political lessons for the present. And the purpose of this liberal education in the classics was clear: to make students morally better, better as individuals, better as citizens of a free republic.

The generation of the founding was neither fixed nor unanimous in its devotion to classical learning. Indeed, already in the debates over the adoption of the Constitution we notice an increasing awareness that Americans are embarked upon an undertaking unprecedented in history, an enterprise in which the lamp of classical experience offers only a faltering light for guidance. There were also radical opponents, like Benjamin Rush, who declared that “were every Greek and Latin book consumed in a bonfire, the world would be the better for it.” That same firebrand would say to John Adams, “*Delenda, delenda est lingua romana.*”<sup>3</sup> But the debate was over the content and means of general education. The purpose remained clear—to educate morally and politically for citizenship in a free republic. In Aristotle’s terms, liberal education was still education in the spirit of the constitution.

That remains the purpose of liberal education, and the fulfillment of that purpose must underlie any effort at creating a legitimate core curriculum. To deny the possibility of creating such a core curriculum is to declare our bankruptcy as educators. It is an easy fallacy to turn the purpose in upon itself, to say to Aristotle that we cannot educate the youth in the spirit of the constitution when we ourselves lack any national consensus about that spirit. A healthy, diverse, and pluralistic society can still have a consensus on fundamental moral

and political values. Indeed, it is obvious that such a consensus does exist among the majority of Americans, and hence, the increasing public outrage over an educational system viewed as having failed its purpose in a democratic society.

So, to answer the question begged by the title of our symposium: Yes, there is a core to the curriculum. In the four-year undergraduate college that core experience should take the form of an intense engagement with seminal texts, ideas, issues, events, and personalities that have shaped the Western tradition. That tradition, with its fundamental idea of liberty under law, is the spirit of our Constitution. This is not an all-encompassing educational experience; and there is no greater obstacle to serious curriculum reform than the idea that general education should provide a watered-down introduction to every discipline, every mode of thought, every civilization. In fact, the core most fulfills its purpose through focus: through a small number of focused courses; through the careful reading and analysis in depth of a select number of texts; and through focus upon a small but seminal set of ideas and issues. The historical tradition of the West is central to that focus, but it is not an all-exclusive focus.

As the founder of the Western historiographical tradition, Herodotus, understood much of what is distinctive about the West—specifically the idea of liberty under law—receives definition only in comparison with other civilizations. My own experience as a teacher convinces me that a core course focusing on classical antiquity can provide a vehicle for introducing students to such monumental statements of the human spirit as the Bhagavad-Gita and the Analects of Confucius. And I remain to be convinced that any injustice is done to these works by introducing them in a context which asks students why the history of freedom begins in Greece rather than in India or China.

A true core experience is historically based; and it leads the student in a progression from the rise of civilization through the twentieth century. It is this part of the core which places the text in a historical context, and it is this part of the core which must do far more than impart historical facts, that will-o'-the-wisp of cultural literacy. It must develop in the student the ability to think historically, to follow the model of antiquity and of the Founding Fathers, and to use history as a tool for understanding and making decisions in the present day. Such a historically-based core must be complemented by a series of courses focusing upon contemporary issues. If we are to educate citizens for civic responsibility, then a real core curriculum will offer the students ample opportunity to apply to the present those ideas and values learned from reading the great books.

What I'm describing is a curriculum we have developed and that we hope to implement beginning next year at Boston University. At the heart of this curriculum is a four-semester sequence which takes the student from classical antiquity to the present, with a focus upon major historical periods, great writers, thinkers, artists, and seminal ideas in the Western tradition. It is complemented by a two-semester sequence on the contemporary world which has

been developed by a committee chaired by my colleague, Brigitte Berger. Both sets of courses are complemented by a core component in the natural sciences, with the ultimate goal the creation of an innovative and integrated course in the sciences which would focus upon the moral, political, and technological issues raised by modern technology.

It is important to secure agreement that a core curriculum has implications far beyond the reform of general education requirements in the undergraduate curriculum. If we are to perform the real purpose of a liberal education, which is to educate in the spirit of the constitution, than that purpose must be evident throughout the student's entire educational program, from the earliest primary grades through graduate and professional training. It is not enough for us as college professors simply to lament the deplorable state in which our students arrive at college, unable after twelve years of compulsory schooling to write a coherent paragraph in their mother tongue. There must be the most active engagement between the colleges and the public schools in the development of primary and secondary school curricula which ensure that students who graduate from high school possess basic cultural literacy, that they can read critically, think logically, and express themselves articulately, and that these students have been prepared for Great Books by having come to love good books. And finally, that these students have a clearly developed moral and political conscience.

That is the goal of the recently established Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character at Boston University. Under the leadership of John Silber and the new dean of the School of Education, Peter Greer, it is intended to be a joint project of the School of Education and the College of Liberal Arts. Its goal is to study from a scholarly point of view, and to facilitate from a practical pedagogical point of view, the teaching of values and ethics in the public schools and colleges. Its still higher mission is to restore to the Great Books their traditional role as purveyors of moral wisdom. It is a project which, it is hoped, may serve as a model for similar collaborative efforts between public schools, schools of education, colleges of arts and sciences, and professional schools in the teaching of ethics.

However, the core curriculum is more than an issue of undergraduate education, and more, even, than an issue with major implications for education in the public schools. It is an issue which, if pursued to its logical consequences, should lead to a transformation of the character of graduate education in the humanities. It is a supreme hypocrisy for us to speak, on the one hand, of the crucial importance of liberal education for our undergraduates, while, on the other, continuing to train our graduate students in the most illiberal fashion, insisting upon the most narrow specialization and supporting an academic system that places good undergraduate teaching at the lowest end of the reward scale.

The destruction of liberal education in the American college may be attrib-

uted to many factors, but nothing has been more instrumental than a faculty too narrowly trained to teach broadly based courses in the humanities—specialists rather than humanists, pedants who desiccate the texts rather than revitalize them. The reconstruction of liberal education will really begin only when we develop a graduate system capable of educating true humanists, scholar-teachers who understand the truly liberal, and the truly liberating quality of the texts they teach, and who convey that understanding to their students with compassion and immediacy. Such a faculty is the real core to a curriculum.

### Notes

1. John Adams, "A Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America," in *The Works of John Adams* (Boston: Little Brown, 1851), 491.
2. *Ibid.*, 469.
3. Letters of Benjamin Rush, ed. L. H. Butterfield (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1951) vol. 2, 1066-67; cf. Meyer Reinhold, *Classica Americana: The Greek and Roman Heritage in the United States* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), 116-141.